

A WALK DOWN MEMORY LANE: REFLECTING ON HOSPITALITY UNDERSTANDING AMONGST UUM STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to reflect on the hospitality understanding amongst hospitality students since the inception of the hospitality programme in Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM). This hospitality programme, named as Bachelor of Hospitality Management with Honours (BHM), was first introduced in 2004. A general review of hospitality education is discussed and followed by a discussion on hospitality education in the Malaysian context. Previous students taking the hospitality programme in UUM were seen as not only filling the loop of not getting their programmes that they desired, but also having less passion in serving the hospitality industry. However, present students are seen as more passionate in taking up this programme whilst also making hospitality management as their number one programme of choice to further their study. Perspectives from industry players are taken into consideration in evaluating hospitality students. In addition, evaluation from employers based on practicum presentations and feedbacks are also considered to investigate the performance of the hospitality students. Present students are seen to have more understanding of what hospitality is all about which had reflected on the way they think and perform their tasks. Thus, it is seen that the present hospitality students are more in demand and more pro-active to the industry's needs after a decade of BHM offering.

Keywords: hospitality students, hospitality education, hospitality understanding, employer evaluation

Introduction

Hospitality study is considered important due to the fact that it is a vital industry in the service sector. According to the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC, 2009), hospitality industry is estimated to have a total of 262.6 million jobs which presented the world's largest workforce by the year 2017 and being one of the most resilient industries in the world. Thus, there is an increasing need for the hospitality education sector to provide enough manpower to cater to the ever-changing and demanding industry. The booming of Malaysia's tourism and hospitality industry has helped to entice 25.72 million tourist arrivals while grossing about RM65.44 billion receipts in 2013. Malaysia is also named the ninth most travelled destination in the world in 2009 (UNWTO website, 2014). With the abundant opportunities of growth in the tourism and services sector, it is forecasted that 500,000 jobs in the hospitality and tourism sector will be available by 2020. Therefore, the industry is expected to require 50,000 hospitality and tourism graduates annually to fill in these jobs. This significant economic contribution of the industry to the country has resulted in the government to recognize the fully importance of the industry and to make Malaysia one of the largest tourism marketplaces in the region (Nair and Whitelaw, 2008). To date, about 1.7 million people are currently employed in the tourism and hospitality sector which accounts for nearly 14% of all jobs in Malaysia. Therefore, the need for upgrading the competencies level of workforce to participate in the tourism and hospitality industry is very important in designing an effective hospitality curriculum which is flexible and well adapted to the dynamic environment (Yusof and Ghazali, 2011).

In line with this positive outlook, Malaysia has developed the hospitality education program to fulfill the country's vision in expanding human resources particularly in the tourism and hospitality industry. One of the educational institutions in Malaysia which focuses on the hospitality education is Universiti Utara Malaysia. This paper aims to reflect on the hospitality understanding amongst hospitality students since the inception of hospitality programme in Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM). The programme, named as Bachelor of Hospitality Management with Honours (BHM), was first introduced in 2004. A review of hospitality education in general are discussed which will be followed by discussion on hospitality education in the Malaysian context. It will narrow down to the subject matter of the paper by focusing on hospitality education in UUM. Perspectives from

industry players are taken into attention in evaluating hospitality students. In addition, evaluation from employers based on practicum presentations and feedbacks are also considered to investigate the performance of hospitality students hence reflecting their understanding of what hospitality signifies.

Hospitality Education – A Review

Malaysian hospitality and tourism industry is expanding as it is a second major source of national income and employment to the people. The need for training in tourism and hospitality in upgrading the competencies level of workforce to participate in the industry is very important. It is therefore imperative to train hospitality personnel with necessary skills through inculcating a new culture to train people to work in hotels and generally in service industry. Haywood (1989) purported that hospitality education is a discipline that has the responsibility to produce knowledge that can be applied by hospitality professionals. According to Ladki (1993), the main purpose of hospitality education is to educate graduates who possess a wide range of transferable and analytical skills. In fact, as stated by Davies (1994), hospitality education must prepare well qualified graduates to fulfill the demand and changes in the hospitality industry. In response, the hospitality education curriculum should be designed to cater the needs of the industry, thus several studies have focused on the importance of hospitality education curriculum (Bach and Millman 1996; Chen 1996, Mohd Shariff and Zainol, 2011). Previously, Pavesic (1991) purported that it is the educators responsibilities to develop new curriculum to fulfill industry needs. In order to produce graduates who can be successful in facing the wide range of changes in the industry, hospitality educators must take action to change the hospitality education curriculum (Umbriet, 1992). Gustafson and Partlow (1998) later propose that the hospitality education curriculum must have specialized courses which could provide students with specific interest area in the industry.

Hospitality defined

The term hospitality is said to be used by different people in different ways (Medlik, 2003). Some common usages are “the act of being hospitable” and “the reception and entertainment of guests or strangers with liberality and goodwill”. Later, hospitality was specifically defined referring to the commercialization of the industry with “the provision of accommodation, food and drinks for people away from home for reward” (Medlik, 2003). Hospitality is, thus regarded as the relationship between the guest and the host, or the practice of being hospitable. This includes the reception and entertainment of guests, visitors, or strangers. By etymology, the word ‘hospitality’ derives from the Latin word “hospes” (Lewis, 2000) meaning “host”, “guest”, or “stranger”. Hospes is formed from hostis, which means “stranger” or “enemy”. Additionally, the word also was rooted from the French “hospitalite” then moved from Latin “hospitalitas”, which then moved into old French “hospitalite” and during the late middle English turned into “hospitality”. Hospitality can also mean the friendly and generous reception and entertainment of guests, visitors, or strangers.

For the purpose of the paper, hospitality understanding is operationalized as “the students’ ability to transform oneself to endure the true meaning of hospitality by reflecting one’s way of behaving based on the curricula being put into the whole hospitality management programme structure”. This includes the university core and the programme core courses inclusive of management, administration and development, technical skills building and practicum elements.

History of hospitality education in Malaysia

The value of hospitality education eventually runs in line with the expansion of the hospitality industry itself. The rapid expansion of industry in developing countries has exaggerated the demand at all levels of employment for competent people. In the Malaysian context, training in the tourism industry is carried out by public and private institutions and agencies. More recently, the private sector has increased its participation through specialist colleges and training units. The early beginnings of hospitality and tourism education took the form of vocational and skills training with the emphasize on entry-level employment opportunities. In order to cater to increasing employment opportunities and the demand for well competent workforce, the number of tourism and hospitality education program offered by higher learning institutions in Malaysia has increased rapidly. It was seen that the training and education for tourism and hospitality is carried out by public and private agencies over the past 30 years (Goldsmith and Zahari, 1994).

Hospitality and tourism education in Malaysia has undergone through so many changes in a few decades. To trace back, the first hospitality and tourism training program was being introduced by National Productivity Corporation (NPC) in the early 70s (Goldsmith and Zahari 1994). This was subsequently followed by MARA Institute of Technology or now known as Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) under the School of Hotel and Tourism Management which was established in 1967, with the offering of the Diploma and Advanced Diploma

in Hotel and Catering Management (Mohd Shariff and Zainol, 2011). Realising the boost in tourism and hospitality industry after 1970s, the institution added three programs, ie: the Diploma in Chef Training, the Diploma in Tourism Administration and the Diploma in Institutional and Catering Management in 1975. In the mid-1980s, the demand for skilled hotel staff rose with the rapid expansion of hotel industry thus hospitality programs gained momentum thereafter (Khoo, 2003). Soon after, private colleges began to offer tourism and hospitality programmes in collaboration with reputable institutions in France, Switzerland, Australia, Britain and the United States e.g. Stamford College (1980), Kolej Damansara Utama and School of Hospitality and Tourism, Taylor's College (1986). Others include Sunway University, Lim Kok Wing University, SEGI University, Management and Science University (MSU), HELP Institute, etc (Mohd Shariff and Zainol, 2011).

History of hospitality education in UUM

Universiti Utara Malaysia was established some 30 years back with the primary objectives to develop and promote management education in the country. The university's objectives are aptly embodied in the following three major thrusts – to be the center of excellence for management education, to be the leading referral center for all aspects of management scholarship and practice and to be the premier resource center in the field of management studies (UUM prospectus, 2013). UUM had taken a serious action by offering the Bachelor of Hospitality Management (BHM) with Honors in 2004. The Hospitality Department was initially established as part of the School of Tourism, Hospitality and Environmental Management (STHEM) and is now currently offered under UUM COLGIS with 19 academic staff (Students Prospectus, 2012). Apart from Bachelor of Hospitality Management with Honours [(BHM (Hons.)], other programmes offered under STHEM are Bachelor of Tourism Management with Honours [(BTM(Hons.)], Master of Science Tourism Management (by research) and PhD (Tourism & Hospitality Management).

With its vision of becoming a renowned hospitality education program, the department emphasizes on producing graduates who are conceptually knowledgeable in theory and practice. In addition, it also intends to furnish graduates to become experts in the specialized area of hospitality. The hospitality program at UUM is designed with a competitive structure which comprised of modules and coursework as to be in line with other hospitality education throughout the world. The school provides students with the knowledge and hands-on experience needed for success in the field. It combines a rigorous academic programme with a minimum of six months industry experience. The aim of this program is to equip the hospitality industry with skilled manpower especially personnel specializing in management areas. This covers developing knowledgeable and versatile human capital that possesses specialized skills with a thorough understanding of hotel operations and management. Students in BHM program are trained in decision making and critical thinking through various coursework components via groups or/and individuals assessments.

The curriculum includes leadership development courses that are blended with work experience. Students are encouraged to participate in community service projects via student clubs and have the opportunity to gain international study experience. UUM does not only offer a high quality education but also focuses on giving a high learning delivered by experienced lecturers. It would take four years to fulfilling a total of 142 credit hours to complete BHM programme. Upon finishing their compulsory courses in UUM, students will undergo their practicum training in established three to five star hotels or any other relevant hospitality establishments for 6 months after their final semester examinations. Having intensive internship programs in the industry to gain hands-on practical experience should bring out students' highest competence (Bagul and Marzuki, 2011). Relevant curriculum and teaching methods as well as calibre and experienced teaching faculties are the strengths of the programme.

To enhance the employability skills, BHM students are equipped with hands-on skills on how to manage and operate hospitality operation via facilities including IFCA Resort Management Information System (IFCA) installed in the computer labs, a basic kitchen for introduction course on food preparation while a commercial kitchen for advance course for food preparation. The students also learned the hands-on skills of food serving and how to run and manage a commercial fine dining restaurant. For the purpose of housekeeping and front office trainings, students are sent to undergo hands-on training imbedded in respective course contents in Executive Development Centre (EDC) Hotel, a subsidiary business under UUM's management, dealing with real-time customers and actual hospitality situations.

It has been a decade since BHM was introduced in 2004. Currently the school has about 450 local and international students, with a total of 600 hospitality graduates since its inception encompassing six student cohorts. MUET'S English band 3 and above is required to qualify to study hospitality management in UUM as the teaching and learning process is conducted via English medium. Further, students are encouraged to interact, ask questions and participate in an active-learning environment. Curriculum review was being conducted twice, the first one in 2006 by a reputable hospitality scholar, Professor Clayton Barrows from the University of Guelph, Canada. The second curriculum review was being performed by Associate Professor Dr Jennifer Chan, another prominent scholar from Universiti Malaysia Sabah in 2010. Suggestions being made by both the

reviewers were taken into consideration in the curriculum development and enhancement to keeping the hospitality curriculum abreast with current issues and trends. In addition, the curriculum of the program has been carefully crafted based on various inputs from the stakeholders so that the content of the programs are flexible and well adapted to the dynamic environment. In order to guarantee education quality, proper curricular design that fit with the local contents and feedbacks from wider stakeholders such as students, educators, industry and society in general were sought after in designing the curricula.

BHM with Honors curriculum structure includes the university component (25 credits), programme core (96 credits), foreign language component (6 credits), practicum (12 credits) and 1 free elective paper (3 credits) with a total of 142 credits altogether for graduation eligibility. As aforementioned, hospitality understanding is reflected by the curricula being put into the whole hospitality management programme structure which includes the university core such as Islamic and Asian civilization, effective communication skills, English for communication, etc. Further, the programme core courses covers aspects of management, administration and development with courses such as principles of economics, fundamentals of finance, introduction to management, organizational behavior, etc. Programme core courses also encompass technical skills building which emphasizes specialized hospitality courses inclusive of introduction to hospitality, housekeeping, hospitality cost control, food and beverage service, hospitality operations management, interpersonal skills, restaurant management, food preparation papers, research papers, etc.

The findings from a study by Mohd Shariff and Zainol (2011) which reviewed the hospitality education program in UUM by focusing on the issue of the relationship between the development of the curriculum and the industry expectations, found that theoretically, the structure is seen by the hospitality experts as fulfilling the gaps in understanding what the industry wants from the hospitality students. The experts also found four major skills components in the curriculum as suggested by many studies regarding hospitality education which fulfills industry's expectation (Bach and Millman, 1996; Ladki 1993; Umbreit 1992). The skills components of the curriculum are business functional skills, hospitality functional skills, personal skills and analytical skills. Figure 1 illustrates Bach and Millman's framework (1996) which coincides with the current curriculum structure of BHM.

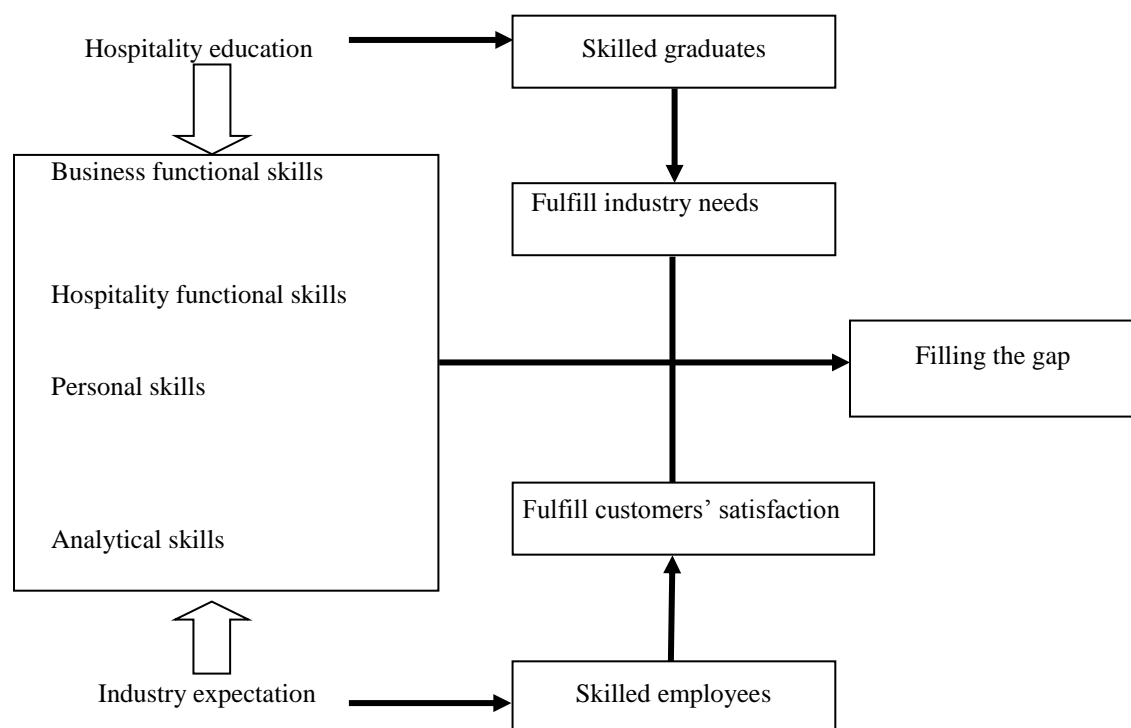


Figure 1 - Hospitality Education and Industry Expectation Framework, based on Bach and Millman (1996)

According to Bach & Millman's framework (1996), the business functional skills consists of courses which involve more business oriented courses (eg: management, accounting, human resource, finance and policy). The hospitality functional skills includes courses in hospitality area (eg. hotel management, food and beverage

preparation, restaurant management, housekeeping, FO management and food sanitation) while the personal skills captures individual capabilities (eg: interpersonal skills, communication skills, written skills, negotiation skills and conflict resolution skills). Finally the analytical skills component require the abilities to analyze specific situations in the hospitality industry, (eg: research, report writing and computer literacy). Figure 2 shows the full curriculum structure for a 4-years duration of study in Bachelor of Hotel Management (BHM) with Honors according to semester inclusive of total credit hours based on notions made by Bach and Millman (1996) (please refer to Figure 2).

SEMESTER 1			SEMESTER 2		
SADN1043	Ethnic Relation	3	SADN1013	Islamic & Asian Civilization	3
SADN1033	Malaysian Studies	3	SBLE1053	Effective Communication Skill	3
SGDN1043	Thinking Science & Ethics	3	BKAL1013	Business Accounting	3
GHOA1013	Introduction to Hospitality	3	BPMN1013	Introduction to Management	3
GHOC1013	Hygiene and Sanitation	3	GHOC1024	Principles of Food Preparation	4
SQQS1013	Elementary Statistics	3		Co-Curriculum	1
	Co-Curriculum	1			
TOTAL		19	TOTAL		17
SEMESTER 3			SEMESTER 4		
SBLE1043	English for Communication II	3	SBLE2103	Process Writing	3
BEEB1013	Principles Of Economics	3	BPME1013	Entrepreneurship	3
GHOC2034	Commercial Food Preparation	4	SBLF1XX3	Foreign Language I	3
BWFF1013	Fundamentals of Finance	3	GHOT2064	Food & Beverage Service	4
BPMN2023	Organizational Behavior	3	GHOT2033	Front Office Management	3
	Co-Curriculum	1	GHOP4013	Interpersonal Skills	3
				Co-Curriculum	1
TOTAL		17	TOTAL		20
SEMESTER 5			SEMESTER 6		
GHOP2043	Applied Information System for Hospitality	3	GHOP3033	Food & Beverage Cost Control	3
SBLE2053	English for Hospitality Purposes	3	GHZP3033	Human Resource Management in Tourism & Hospitality	3
SBLF2XX3	Foreign Language II	3	GHOM3053	Hospitality Sales & Marketing	3
GHOT3043	Housekeeping	3	GHOU3063	Hospitality and Tourism Law	3
SBLE3013	Business Report Writing	3	GHZZ3063	Tourism Research	3
GHOP3013	Hospitality Operation Management	3	GHOL4023	Hospitality Strategic Management	
GHOP3023	Restaurant Management	3			
TOTAL		21	TOTAL		18
SEMESTER 7			SEMESTER 8		
GHOZ4066	Research Paper	6	GHOX4912	Practicum	12
GHOE4033	Hospitality Entrepreneurial Development	3			
GHOP4053	Hospitality Seminar	3			
GHOP4063	Banquet And Convention Management	3			
XXXXXXX	Free Elective	3			
TOTAL		18	TOTAL		12

Figure 2: Proposed course structure for Bachelor of Hospitality Management with Honors [BHM (Hons)]

The study by Mohd Shariff and Zainol (2011) further added that practicum internship is one of the practical courses which the experts believe play an important role in determining the real value of the curriculum. This is the only course which balances the needs for theory and practice. Eventually, all the four components are summarized by the experts as important aspects in determining the quality of the hospitality education curriculum in order to fulfill the industry needs. This has supported the notion made by Bach and Millman (1996). Further, these courses enhance the communication skills of the students. This is done mainly through having a large proportion of their coursework delivered via individual and group presentations. The purpose of this mode of delivery is to prepare students with high self-confidence and to become a high-esteemed individual equipped with conflict resolution background to be better of prepared for the real world scenarios.

The Conflict – Past vs. Present

UUM has managed to produce 6 cohorts of hospitality students thus far. In reminiscing the early cohorts of hospitality graduates, there were some drawbacks and conflicts surrounding them. Previous students taking hospitality programme in UUM was seen not only filling the loop of not getting their programmes that they desired, but also having less passion in serving the hospitality industry. The students were reluctant to take up the programme and were unsure of what the future might hold for them. Accepting the university offer was just regarded as a gateway to university-life in the hope that they could change the program of study once registered as a university student. They were also seen as confused at times and were without having a longer plan of survival. The first cohort of BHM students were not sure what “hospitality” means, whereby confusing themselves with the word “hospital”, though the words do have a long history root. At that moment, the students were thinking that they will be taught on medicines, and issues concerned with hospitals. Due to these circumstances, students back then were seen as “either the glass is half empty or half full”. In class teaching and learning were somewhat slow as the students were gauging to learn and get themselves familiar with new hospitality terminologies, especially in the early semesters.

Things were made a bit complicated as there was only basic technical kitchen for students’ training. There were issues of negative perception among parents with regards to working in a hotel, especially amongst the Malay race as the hotel industry is regarded as “a dark-side”. No doubt, it was a big challenge in the early inception of BHM in terms of turning the students’ mindset towards understanding the hospitality concept as a whole. According to Bagul and Marzuki (2007), there is also lack of awareness among students of some of the main characteristics of working in the tourism industry whereby having low pay and working unsociable hours were among their main concerns. They further added that the lack of awareness of the realities of employment in the industry and the high expectations of the students had therefore limited the future career prospects of hospitality graduates.

However, present students are seen as more passionate in taking up this programme whilst also making hospitality management as their number one programme of choice to further their study. As the tourism and hospitality industry keep on improving year by year and people realize the positive impacts that the industry brings about, more establishments inclusive of private and government-based education centers started to offer hospitality programmes and courses to cater for hospitality-oriented requirements. The mushrooming of numerous hospitality education establishments has eventually risen people’s awareness on the importance of acquiring hospitality knowledge and technical skills to equip one-self in order to enter the fast-changing industry. Not only students, but parents’ perception has also changed eventually as they are more conscious of the positive advantages the students could acquire when entering the hospitality industry. Students were seen as more open, pro-active, possessing higher self-confidence, paying more attention to detail, improved interpersonal skills, enhanced soft skills, and not to mention grooming skills. With the improved technology and facilities, in class participation has improved.

Perspectives from industry players are taken into consideration in evaluating hospitality students and thus reflecting their understanding of hospitality concept. Based on practicum visits made throughout Malaysia, it was seen that majority of the employers were satisfied with the students’ performances during their 6 months practicum tenure in the respective establishments. The students are generally being placed in major departments in a hotel operation covering front and back-of-the-house operations ie: housekeeping, front office, kitchen, restaurants, human resources, etc. Most of the students are rotated in various departments so as to collect as much experience as possible during their practicum placements. During the placement, the students will have the opportunity of being visited by a visiting lecturer who will consult their supervisors on the progress and performance of the students. The lecturer will also meet up with the student to discuss practicum matters. On overall, supervisors are satisfied with the quality and performance of the students. Feedback given by the supervisors are students are discipline, able to follow orders and pro-active in conducting daily tasks, fast learner, able to solve problems without too much supervision, well groomed, etc. There are always requirements for taking more students in the future by the respective establishments which shows the sign of quality students

being produced by the school.

In addition, evaluation from employers based on practicum presentations and feedbacks are also considered to investigate the performance of hospitality students. During practicum exercise, employers were also asked to fill up an evaluation form to assess the student's performance during their 6-months tenure. 5 point likert scale were being used to evaluate students's performance with the lowest point (1) being "dissatisfied" and the highest (5) being "excellent". These evaluation forms are to be filled up by all the department supervisors with which the students did the practicum at the end of each department period. The evaluation form covers aspects of self-discipline, analyzing ability, leadership ability, various skills, personal appearance and information management skills. There is also an open ended column for the employers to include additional information they think relevant to be added in the assessing the students. In general, most of the employers rated between 3-5 with the majority rating 4 (satisfied) for most of the criteria. Although there are still room for improvement, these ratings has highlighted that the current curricula has been successful in transforming these students to be hospitality-oriented personnel. Again, more employers are demanding for more practicum students to be placed in their establishments as the students are seen as fast learners and are seen to have a good future in the hospitality industry. This signifies the current curricula being implemented to portray high quality hospitality education which fulfills industry needs and requirements. Although some technical aspects need some room of improvement for example: the different types of software being applied in different types of establishments, students are foreseen to be able to adjust to the advancement of technologies used.

Students were also required to feedback and give own reflection on the curricula being studied for BHM four years study programme. This section is required as part of the practicum report for submission after having finished their practicum tenure. It was discovered that the majority of the students were satisfied with the curriculum structure throughout the four-years undergraduate studies. Reflections in terms of self-evaluation gained from the learning process experience for practicum has shown that all students regarded the practicum element as very important in order for them to relate the theories learnt with real-life situation. Majority of them agreed that practicum placements had improved the way they perform their job tasks, while also bringing up their confidence level. Their communication aspect has improved and interpersonal skills were enhanced. All students agreed that practicum placement had developed their team-working and leadership skills. Students were also required to present their practicum reports two weeks after finishing their practicum duration. The purpose of having the presentation is to evaluate whether there are changes before and after undertaking practicum from the students' perspective. Students will be assessed in terms of establishing credibility, and mostly communication and interpersonal skills with certain sets of criteria forwarded.

The Way Forward

In general, it was seen that the hospitality graduates from UUM has achieved the desired expectation of employers in order to prepare competent graduates to enter the hospitality job market. In particular, through the reflections being done by the students and employers, it was evident that the students had succeeded in achieving what the hospitality management programme had targeted. More students are demanded by employers and this is proven by majority of them receiving job offers straight after or some even during practicum tenure. This has supported Ladki's (1993) proposition as the main purpose of hospitality education is to educate graduates to possess a wide range of transferable and analytical skills and prepare well qualified graduates to fulfill the demand and changes in the hospitality industry (Davies, 1994). As the curricula being developed in BHM covers all four skills components covering business functional skills, hospitality functional skills, personal skills and analytical skills (Mohd Shariff and Zainol, 2011), the structure is seen as fulfilling the gaps in understanding what the industry wants from the hospitality students. Therefore, the students are seen as having a holistic understanding of the meaning of hospitality as being operationalized in this paper based on the positive feedbacks given by employers as major stakeholders. Thus, UUM does not only offer high quality education but also focuses on giving a high learning knowledge delivered by experienced lecturers.

Therefore, it is seen that the present hospitality students are more in demand and more pro-active to the industry's needs after a decade of BHM offering. However, the compelling issue now faced by hospitality education and the hospitality industry is how to attract and retain a critical group of talented people. Another challenge would be on discussion about contemporary attitudes toward the generation undertaking hospitality education and making career decisions in the future. This will thus be a basis for discussion on how best to handle these issues so that organizations within the hospitality industry can successfully recruit, select, train, retain and motivate future talent. On the other hand, the fast changing hospitality industry would demand regular review and changes. Future curriculum review should include work-related contexts where possible with high quality case studies which apply general business skills into hospitality curriculum (Bagul and Marzki, 2011). In addition, they purported that more specialist skills are required in the areas of information technology, marketing and planning and covering soft skills such as communication, team-working, problem solving and motivational skills.

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